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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000477

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PACOM FOR POLAD

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TAGS: [LA](#) [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: GOL WORRIED ABOUT MARIJUANA TRAFFICKERS IN
BOLIKHAMXAI

REF: A. VIENTIANE 449

[B](#). VIENTIANE 288

[C](#). VIENTIANE 085

[D](#). 06 VIENTIANE 1205

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires a.i. Mary Grace McGeehan for Reason 1.
4 (D)

[1](#). (C) Summary: Provincial officials in Bolikhamxai Province are worried that they are losing control of eastern border districts to drug traffickers producing marijuana for commercial export. These districts are populated by upland minorities including Hmong and Khamu. The officials stated that the groups controlling this production are unlike anything that the police have encountered before, both in organizational capacity and propensity for violence. While provincial officials are leery of any effort to attempt forced eradication and favor drug education programs as a mitigating measure, the central government has said that it may have to send the military in to determine the extent of the marijuana and eradicate it if necessary. The GOL has said informally that it may request U.S. counter-narcotics funding for a marijuana survey. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) On May 10, NAS Director met in Paksane with Mr. Bounpone Intavong, the Director of the Bolikhamxai Provincial Committee for Drug Control (PCDC), and his staff. Also attending the meeting was Kou Chansina, Acting Vice Chairman of the Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC). Bounpone said that he had become very concerned about recent developments in Viengthong and Khamkeut Districts, which border Vietnam on the eastern side of Bolikhamxai. According to the PCDC staff, trafficking organizations have set up commercial production of marijuana in remote, dispersed tracts throughout the border region. Some plots are in areas so isolated that they can only be reached by a three-day movement on foot.

[3](#). (C) According to Bounpone, the marijuana is being produced for export to Thailand and elsewhere in the region. He stated that unlike opium, marijuana is not grown for local consumption; it is produced only at the direction of the trafficking organizations which pay local villagers to travel deep into the hill country and establish small plots. (Note: Bounpone could not identify the origin of the new

trafficking organizations.) End note.

¶4. (C) Bounpone told the NAS Director that he favored addressing the growing marijuana problem through drug education that would focus on the illicit nature of cannabis cultivation and the potential legal peril for those involved. He stated that he preferred to avoid any attempt at eradication, because it was likely to provoke a violent reaction from traffickers and growers. Consensus among the PCDC staff was that civilian police were clearly not up to the task and currently are not able to undertake any cannabis interdiction activities in the border region.

¶5. (C) Kou suggested that the first step in dealing with this problem should be a survey, similar to, but on a smaller scale than, the annual opium survey conducted by UNODC, so that the GOL could determine the full extent of the problem. He did not state exactly how this ought to be accomplished but indicated that a substantial portion of the survey work might have to be done on foot rather than through aerial observation as with opium, because aircraft attempting to over fly the marijuana fields might be fired upon. He said that the GOL may seek U.S. funding for a survey under existing LOAs (Comment: While we will review such a request if in fact we receive one, it is unlikely that we would agree to fund a program with this level of danger and military involvement.)

¶6. (C) Kou said that, if eradication was necessary, it would have to be done by military units. The PCDC staff agreed. They and Kou affirmed that civil authorities were not up to the task of dealing with the violent traffickers controlling the marijuana cultivation. Kou said that, "If we send

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soldiers in, a fire team (four to five) won't do. We will need to send platoons (approximately thirty to forty soldiers each) to deal with the security problems that an eradication effort might entail."

¶7. (C) When the NAS Director inquired as to the nature and size of the trafficking organizations, neither the PCDC nor LCDC representatives had any answers. According to the PCDC staff, much of the border region is populated by ethnic Khmu villages, but all felt it unlikely that the villagers had a role other than as paid cultivators. (Note: The districts are home to a large number of Hmong, some of whom have been displaced or otherwise impacted by hydropower development in the region). When asked about the use of informants, Kou responded that traffickers paid too well and killed too easily, making intelligence collection extremely difficult. The ruggedness of these remote areas adds to the difficulty the province faces in ascertaining the scope of the cannabis trade. The NAS then inquired about traffickers operating on both sides of the border with Vietnam, and the PCDC staff said that that was a possibility but added that law enforcement cooperation with Vietnam was very good.

¶8. (C) Comment: The issue of marijuana production in Bolikhamxai is not new; what has changed is the GOL's level of concern. This is the first time that GOL officials, albeit at the provincial level, have admitted to the NAS that they have largely lost control of districts to traffickers. If true, this is a serious problem, and the potential strength of trafficking organizations, if left unchecked, is more worrisome than the immediate problem of marijuana cultivation. End Comment.
MCGEHAN